

Kassandra, or, The Possibility of Empathy

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1

Sun and wind – Helios and Zephyrus – punish the land. It takes but a single gesture to wipe her hair out of her face and shield her eyes from the sun. She has no need to look out into the plain to know he's there. He rides slowly, then dismounts. Leads his horse with a touch that betrays tenderness. In her mind's eye, Cassandra can see thousands upon thousands of riders who have no tenderness for their horses: too many horses to weep for.

He traces the line of the surf. She could recognise him as herald of the King of Troy even without her second sight, on account of the horse he is leading - a courser, black as charcoal, a lineage as old as the city walls. Only King Priam's heralds ride them.

Once upon a time, she refused the attentions of a god. She does not remember well: it is a memory from before the overwhelming of her senses. The past has no shape, no colour, no flavour; much unlike the future.

She tries hard to remember that moment. She was ignorant of the world; ignorant of men, and of women; of the male body, and her own. And then she was wooed. By a god. Phoibos Apollon.

It is alleged she led him on. She did not understand courtship; she did not understand what coyness was becoming of a woman. She understands now. She learned to understand right after.

What she does know, for a certainty, is that the god will complain about her refusal – to other gods. Hermes and Dionysus.

“She is a cold woman,” Phoibos Apollon will say. “Like dipping your toe into a northern sea. She cares about herself, and herself only. About nobody else - not even me.”

He looks away from them, sips his ambrosia, which, going by his face, has turned to vinegar.

The other two gods are sympathetic. “So...” Hermes asks. “Did you give it to her?”

Kassandra knows what Hermes means by this, but Phoibos Apollon pretends as if he doesn't. “What do you mean?”

“Did you punish her?” Hermes prods. Phoibos Apollon shakes his head, still pretending to be confused. Dionysus, further gone as he always is, clarifies.

“Did you rape her?”

Phoibos Apollon, just now the image of misery, chuckles first, takes another sip, begins to laugh, shakes his head in denial. “No, I didn't,” keeps laughing – the other two gods giggle along, no doubt keen to find out what the joke is, and Phoibos Apollon clarifies: “No. No, I did her much worse. Somebody will do it for me. Ten years from now, a man will rape her, and I could never be as vicious as him. I gave her the awareness of what he will do. Every day of her life, she will smell him and taste him and feel him. She should have gone with me. I smell nicer, taste nicer. I'm not as brutal.”

She is dependent upon the god's account, because she does not remember. She refused him, evidently. But she can't remember what she said or did to do so. “Kassandra – cold like the northern sea,” he says. The other gods sympathise with him, and agree. Women are like that. Treacherous. Never do they press him on the details of her betrayal.

But she wants to know. How did the god ask for her maidenhood? What were the words he used? And how did she refuse? Only if Apollo himself reveals the answers will she know – but he doesn't. He will name her cold – and says no more. She can see the future; she cannot read minds.

2

It is a steep, upward path to lead a horse along, and she decides she will meet him some of the way down. He will ask her straight questions, but will not ask about his own future. He has not been instructed to. He is called Heraclitus. He will share his name with a philosopher hundreds of years in the future. The philosopher Heraclitus will be known as the philosopher who weeps. The man approaching will not weep. Ever. Not even in private. Cassandra finds this strange. It goes against what she thinks she understands about him. She looks into his eyes, and thinks they are eyes that would weep. Not for himself, perhaps, but for others. Except that he never will. She knows for a certainty that he will never weep

The philosopher Heraclitus will proclaim that you cannot step into the same river twice. This man Heraclitus is not a river – more a lake. Can you step into the same lake twice?

The philosopher Heraclitus will say the world is one of struggle, and there are two forces, Love, and Hatred. The man Heraclitus – she sees him leading his horse. His hair is light. It appears thick, but that is a mirage, in truth it is already thinning. It is because his face is more wrinkled than normal for those his age, his blue eyes more sorrowful. He looks older, because his eyes carry a kindness that appears unnatural in the young. When he looks at you, it is as if he looks at your pain. But he never speaks to it. He is a messenger, and there isn't a better messenger than him, because he does not have words of his own. He says what he has been instructed to say. When he is given a message in return, he passes that back on. He is useful to a tyrant of a certain sort – the sort who looks for quiet obedience. A tyrant who needs every message twisted to flatter would have Heraclitus' tongue out before long. That tyrant is not her father. Her father needs a messenger who tells the truth.

Heraclitus will die in the first year of the war, lying on his back, the edge of the Greater Ajax' seven-layered coming down on the bridge of his nose. The sung poems will not take an interest in him. Neither will the written ones.

"I come from your father the king," Heraclitus says.

"And what does my father want from me?"

She knows the answer; but she asks anyway.

"He seeks your counsel regarding the coming years."

"My father will not believe what I have to say."

"He told me you would say that, and he told me how to respond," he says. "He will choose not to believe what you say, because there is no benefit in believing. But he will choose to know what you say, because it is a king's duty to know."

"I could tell my father many things," she says. "If only I understood what he wants to know. I could tell him of strange clouds, growing like toadstools in a forest, covering the world beyond what we know of it, bringing infinite death. Does he want to know that?"

"He wants to know the future of the city."

"The city will fall. It will be destroyed." She pauses. Must she say more? "It will be razed."

"His sons. What happens to his sons?"

"My brother Hector will defend the city with his life."

Her brother Hector chooses to shave his face, and cut his hair. Hair is abundant everywhere on his body, but he insists no hair must grow on his cheeks, his chin, his upper lip, or below his ears. No hair must peek from underneath his helmet. It lends a sharpness to his features, as if his face is

the edge of a knife. None of the Greeks cut their hair or shave their cheeks, and few of the Trojans do. It might be he believes it makes him stronger, and he is stronger than almost anyone, but he will find that he is not stronger than Achilles, who lets his hair grow like any man.

“My brother Paris – the torch of Troy, gods curse his name – will avenge him, and be killed himself in turn. Tell me, has my father asked about the fate of his daughters?”

“He has not, my lady.”

“Has my mother asked after me?”

Confronting Greater Ajax, Heraclitus will slip, and fall over backwards. Greater Ajax will stand over him and dispatch him with his shield, without even needing to look at his victim. Is Heraclitus a weak man, a warrior of no account? Hardly. It will have rained the night prior to the battle, the soil will be soaked, it will be the very soil that betrays him. If he fails in any way, it is a failure of imagination, for not thinking of a way of becoming a hero other than confronting a man twice his size and with near-perfect ambidexterity.

That name, Ajax, resounds heavily in her head, but she does not think on swarthy Ajax, Greater Ajax, very much. No, it's Lesser Ajax, pale Ajax, who would not tan even under ten years of a Trojan sun. She should not think about Lesser Ajax; not right now, while speaking to one who will have his face cleft by a shield. There will be a day when dozens of women, her sisters, her aunts, will suffer as she will. She can close her eyes and see it in front of her; she can also see it with her eyes open. The pale, pale face of Lesser Ajax reduces the suffering of all others to shadows in her mind.

Heraclitus has not been sent to her to hear of the suffering of any one man or woman. She must tell him what he has been sent to hear.

“The Greek kings have honoured their oaths,” she says. “Even now, their ships are braving storms, monsters, and the wrath of the gods. They have left behind their families and do not expect to return. My father the king has given offense, sir. Grievous offense. He has indulged the whim of his least deserving son.

My brother Hector will hold off the Greeks for a decade but it will be to no purpose. His son and my nephew Astyanax, now not even born, will be cast from the city gates at the behest of the trickster Odysseus. He will be four years old as he dies. The city will perish, and disappear, until, in the distant future, a deluded man from the north will rediscover it. If my brother would listen to me, sir, I would tell him: leave it. Look at a fire. Trace the smoke with your eyes; how it ascends, from cold, to still colder heights. Even as he stands alone to face fleet-footed Achilles, he will believe he has saved the city. Even as he falls, under the weeping eyes of Phoibos Apollon, he will believe he has saved the city.”

Does she know what her brother thinks or believes? No, she does not. She must surmise it from his words, his acts, his posture, his expressions. She can’t read her brother; one of the kindest of men, and one of the least readable. But she wants to think that he believes: in the possibility of victory, in the future.

“I beg of you, sir, please, do not talk to my brother.”

She can see the city behind him. If she holds up her thumb, she can blot it from her vision. If she closes her eyes, she can see the walls fall. They have been built up over many years. Whenever hands were plentiful, cubits have been added, at the top of the wall as at the base. The stones of different eras are of different colours. It is like a plaid woven of a mixture of flax and wool. It is her belief that the very extent and weight of the walls is what brings the Greeks to want to destroy the city. For decades, every Greek merchant crossing the Dardanelles had to pass by Troy’s haughty gates. Sailing past them feels like an abasement. The accumulated humiliation has finally taken the shape of an army.

“I thank you, my lady. You have said what I have come to ask you. I can report this to the king.”

“It will be a way back to the city,” she says.

He nods.

“I have wine, and bread,” she says. “It is sour wine, and sour bread, because it is what I prefer. The taste of life. Would you not sit and drink with me?”

She knows he is inclined to want to do it, because he is a man who has compassion for her. This much she knows. Some actions speak so clearly, that the intentions behind them can be surmised without leaving doubt.

3

Most men take fright when they see the Greater Ajax. They find it in themselves to stand up to him – she can see it in their posture, a straightening, a tensing of the muscles – and then, as they approach him, the determination flows out of them. They might still move forward, but their shoulders slump as if they are already running away. Heraclitus shoulders are impressive that way. They are not broad, he is not a strong man, nor is he the most skilled of warriors, but he never shows fear. Not as a grown man, certainly: she cannot look into his childhood, and does not know whether he was ever scared. His children are scared, of many things; she sees them, taking fright at dogs, and serpents, and the thunder. There she sees Heraclitus too, with finally a hint of feeling: lifting up his boy, lifting up his girl, and a smile that bares no teeth, a gentle curling of the corners of his lips.

When he is out drinking with the other soldiers, he sits back, nods, but never laughs at their jokes. They laugh at things that are funny; and at things that are horrifying. About the rape of women. Many kind souls, too, joke and laugh along with them. She does not believe that they shouldn't. She does not believe they should stand up and walk away. Heraclitus does not walk away,

but he never laughs. One time, a soldier will ask him why he isn't laughing. "Is this not funny to you?" Because it must be funny. Not because it is, but because nobody will trust a man who fails to laugh at the pain of others. Heraclitus does not answer; he is not an answering man. Another soldier gestures at his interlocutor to sit down: "The King's envoy, man. Will you shut it? You know he is the King's envoy!"

Heraclitus holds drink without betraying himself. Never has he thrown up, never turned a fool. A man who does not get drunk cannot be trusted, unless he is the King's envoy: if he is, he must be trusted. It is that same coldness, that lack of fear for the Greater Ajax, that lack of fear for death: all of it makes him the King's envoy. She knows how the King will talk about him, explaining it to her brother. "He is a common man. He appears common. His skill with a lance, and a sword: common. Would you notice him standing in a crowd?"

"No," Hector says. "Never."

"Because you don't look hard enough," Priam says. "He is the man who shows no weakness. He is the man I can send out as my emissary, because his thoughts and feelings will never betray him. Does he have thoughts and feelings? I could not tell you, and I have known him long. No other man has such devotion. He must be my envoy for as long as he lives; if he dies, I will regret it forever."

"Daddy," she thinks, "you are wrong. He has feeling; does not betray it to his king. You say you have looked at him harder than anyone. No, Daddy, no. I have. I see it when he picks up his children. There's a curling of the lips when he does. And there will come a day, Daddy, there will come a day..."

And she realises, as she thinks it, that it is what kills Heraclitus, nine years before the city falls: there will come a day when he shows feeling in front of his king.

Her father will never mention to anybody what Heraclitus asked of him. Heraclitus will continue to serve as his envoy, but then, on the first day of the war, Priam will order for him to be placed in the vanguard. Hector does wonder why.

“He is a brave man,” Priam says. “Braver than anyone in this city. Braver than you, my son. Yes. He is the bravest. You are stronger, a more accomplished warrior, you have far less to be afraid of. Heraclitus will not flinch.”

“No, daddy, no,” she thinks. “It is because he showed his feelings. It is because he spoke up for me.”

Hector does not question the reversal; nor does he take notice when Heraclitus dies. On that day, the arrogance of the Trojans dies, and many of them die with it. It is a day when the Trojans are beaten on the plain, and must flee into the city. It is the day when the Greeks are boastful, and sad, because this war will only last two days – today, and tomorrow – and who would sing a poem about a two-day war? It is the day Heraclitus’ head is cleft by Greater Ajax’ shield, five counts in the life of the Greater Ajax, one of two dozen men he kills that day. Greater Ajax will boast about it only once. “There was this man, I crushed his head with my shield. It’s not blood or flesh in a man’s head, it’s a grey goo. I didn’t know.”

Hector and Priam also believe it will be a two-day war: today and tomorrow. They speak all night about what can be done to make the war last at least longer than that. They will not mention Heraclitus on the night that he dies. She could tell him of their silence. “A prediction of the future: you will die in the war.” He wouldn’t care about that. But maybe this: “Hector and Priam, for whom you will die, will not speak your name once you have.” Would that be enough to make him hold back from the Greater Ajax? He is destined not to believe her, and why would he? He has lived his life for the king. What could she possibly say that would make him hesitate to die for him?

4

She gives him her sour bread to eat. Her bitter olives. The wine that has no sweetness, that would be disgusting to some, but not to her because it tastes like the world.

“I will make a prediction about you. It is but a small matter. You are a servant, serving your king without question, and you will petition him only once. It is two months from now. You will come up to the throne, where King Priam – my father – is sitting. You will ask him – and these will be your exact words, and they are more eloquent than how you speak to me, because you have rehearsed them” – she almost feels as if she turns into him, as if she is looking through his eyes, eyes that are kinder than her own. It is an illusion, brought on by her mimicking his posture and facial expressions – “Your Grace, take pity on your daughter. You have not seen her there, you cannot understand how lonely she is, with the city so far away it becomes as small as the nail on my thumb.” Do you believe me, when I tell you that you will say that?”

“It is not for me to petition the king.”

He never eats or drinks with relish, not when being given the best from the king’s table, nor when given her plain food. He always looks pensive when eating or drinking, as if always aware of where his food comes from, of who had to suffer so that he could eat it. “But you will,” she thinks. “You will petition the king. What else can I say to persuade you?”

“You might believe, sir, that to live here, with only the wind whispering in my ears, is a terrible thing. Your life is in the city. You ride out from it, through emptiness, and then you return to it. It must seem to you that whoever is banished from the city lives with one desire, which is to return. That is how you understand the life of man. You must understand, sir, how many different kinds of man there are. How one man is not in any way the same as another man. Life in the city is a matter of indifference to me. I see all men, of all time. I see them from close by, I can hear them and

smell them, and in one case – “ she resists the retching feeling as she invokes the Lesser Ajax’s tongue – “taste them. Standing on this rock, I am closer to man than anyone. You must not take pity on me. I know it is in your heart to do so, but you mustn’t. Do not give affront to the king.”

His plea to Priam will be without a purpose. She will be taken back into the city, but not on his account. It is because the Greeks arrive. She might be an embarrassment to the king inside the walls, but she would be a greater embarrassment still inside the Greek encampment. Heraclitus pleading for her will have only one consequence: to destroy him. Can she say anything more to sway him? Maybe this. Maybe one thing. To help him understand that he need not pity her loneliness. She will tell him – not what will happen to him. She can’t bear to tell him that. Nor what will happen to his wife and children – they will live, enslaved. She would not inflict so much pain on him as to let him know. There is one more thing she can bear to tell him.

“You need not pity my loneliness, sir. It is as nothing, nothing. The world does not believe my prophecies. It is a state of bliss, not to believe my prophecies. I believe my prophecies, and to believe is pain. Have you heard of the Lesser Ajax?”

“I have heard of the Greater Ajax,” he says. “I had wondered why he was called ‘Greater’.”

“The Lesser Ajax will seek me out as the city falls,” she says. “I will not be the first woman he sees; he will pass many. I understand his bitterness. The Greater Ajax – “ who will slay her interlocutor – ‘is known as the Greater Ajax for good reason. He is a stronger and prouder man. The Lesser Ajax will amount to little next to him. To stand in the shadow of other heroes – Achilles, Diomedes – is bearable, but it is as if Greater Ajax robs him of his name.

Lesser Ajax disgusts me, but my anger is reserved for the Gerenian Nestor. “Let no man depart who has not lain with a Trojan woman,” he will say. Rallying the Greeks, he will make them swear an an oath to defile us. Nestor will not be capable of taking a Trojan woman. He will boast of the women he has taken in the wars of years past; how he has taken them against their will. Perhaps

it is mere boastfulness. I see all that is in the future; I don't see what has been. Whether true or not – the Greeks will listen.

If I flee inside the temple, he will follow, Lyssa goddess of anger and lust having taken hold of him. He has lived ten years as the Lesser Ajax; this night, he will challenge the gods.

I do not flee inside out of fear. How would I? Fear is based in ignorance, I have none of that. I am not destined to die at the hands of the Lesser Ajax. But I can affect fear. Seeing me afraid, he will lose his caution. He will take pride in raping the woman who can see the future but is never believed. As he comes closer to me, I will stand with my back to the altar. If I stand there, he will force me down upon the altar and take me right there. At the last, I will warn him against what he is doing. I will tell him he is infringing upon the rights of the gods, and beg of him not to do it, *for his sake*, because the gods will exact their vengeance. I will explain to him – as I plead with him, as I weep, as I scream – that the gods will destroy him for what he's doing, that he will perish standing on a rock in the Aegean Sea, laughing at the gods, before being swallowed by the waves and never re-emerging. I can tell him, because he will not believe me. He will laugh at what I say, mock my prophecy as he is raping me.”

Heraclitus looks away from her, at the flask of wine. Brings it to his lips, drinks, holds the wine in his mouth. It takes him a long time, as if he is hesitant to swallow it down.

“What the Lesser Ajax does..... it is our law..... the right of the victor,” he says. “But he must not infringe upon the rights of the gods.”

She sees him riding off, far away, holding a steady pace; never looks around to her. Was it even a prophecy? “If you give affront to the king, your life will not end well.” That’s a prophecy. “Do not give affront to the king” is advice, that anyone could extend to him. Her prophecies will not be believed, but it is cruel that even advice that would be mere common sense from anyone else should be disregarded. The same with the horse. She knows what will happen, but will nobody be able to guess? Will it not be transparent enough even without her warning? Or will they haul in the horse merely because she will advise against doing so, not even checking on that suspicious hatch underneath? Has she doomed Heraclitus, by begging him not to speak for her? Riding towards a city still destined to fall, he is still destined to petition his king, still destined to die on the first day of the war.

She wishes she could forget, and she knows she will be able to. Everything will have to happen first; once she has, she can forget. What she foresees is alive to her, something she can reach out to, break a bit off of, put in her mouth and taste; her memories are pale and grey and have the flavour of sheep milk. The promise of the future is that, beginning on the day it happens, the fall of the city will be less real than it is now. One day, the image of her brother Hector, dragged along behind Achilles’ chariot, will fade; her city burning, will fade. Sometimes, when she breathes in, she can smell the smoke. She will not smell it anymore, after it happens. Sometimes, when she drinks water, she tastes the Lesser Ajax’s sweat instead; when she drinks wine, she tastes his saliva. The worst thing will not be that he penetrates her; it will be that he will force his tongue into her mouth. When she eats lamb, she tastes his tongue instead. There will be a brief respite, while a prisoner in Agamemnon’s palace, when she will be able to taste water again, taste wine again, taste lamb again. She can look forward to a time when Lesser Ajax will have died, buried under rocks and sea, punished – and she can live for several weeks, and go to her death calmly.

Considering it, the future, how it will bring consolation, her mother’s image is most alive to her. Everything will already have happened. Heraclitus will have been slain by Greater Ajax. Her

brother Hector will have been slain by Achilles; her brother Paris by Philoctetes; her father Priam, the king, by Neoptolemos, son of Achilles, in front of Zeus' altar. Lesser Ajax will have violated her on the altar of Pallas Athena. It is past, and she will be elated with the awareness that it will not come again. Her mother sees her, will not speak to her, not even look at her, but *Kassandra* knows what she will say. First, she will say: "My daughter *Kassandra* – the madness that grew in my womb! The Greeks must not witness my shame – hide her!" She doesn't ask. She commands. She stands there in a plain woollen robe, her hair dishevelled, but there is a quality to her posture, and something in her eyes, a glint not of silver but of the moonlight reflected in a treacherous sea, that still marks her out as *Hecuba*, Queen of Troy. She can still give orders; can still scorn her daughter.

Later, and it is only moments later, her back will bend, the moonlight in her eyes will extinguish, and she will be an old woman, and a mother at the point of surviving all of her children, and she will cry out: "My daughter *Kassandra*! My sweet, sweet child! Hide her from the Greeks!"